

Published in final edited form as:

Clin Psychol Sci. 2014 September 1; 2(5): 628–637. doi:10.1177/2167702614521188.

Environmental and Genetic Influences on Neurocognitive Development: The Importance of Multiple Methodologies and Time-Dependent Intervention

Annette Karmiloff-Smith¹, B. J. Casey², Esha Massand¹, Przemyslaw Tomalski³, and Michael S. C. Thomas¹

¹Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development, Birkbeck, University of London

²Sackler Institute, Weill Cornell Medical College

³Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw

Abstract

Genetic mutations and environmental factors dynamically influence gene expression and developmental trajectories at the neural, cognitive, and behavioral levels. The examples in this article cover different periods of neurocognitive development—early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—and focus on studies in which researchers have used a variety of methodologies to illustrate the early effects of socioeconomic status and stress on brain function, as well as how allelic differences explain why some individuals respond to intervention and others do not. These studies highlight how similar behaviors can be driven by different underlying neural processes and show how a neurocomputational model of early development can account for neurodevelopmental syndromes, such as autism spectrum disorders, with novel implications for intervention. Finally, these studies illustrate the importance of the timing of environmental and genetic factors on development, consistent with our view that phenotypes are emergent, not predetermined.

Keywords

developmental disorders; environmental effects; genetics; memory

It may seem a truism to state that development is dynamic, not static. Yet the literature continues to use the phenotypic end state of the mature adult brain as a rather static framework for understanding genotype/phenotype relations and as an explanatory model for neurodevelopmental disorders. Indeed, disorders are often explained in terms of intact or impaired modules (Clahsen & Temple, 2003), with genotype/phenotype relations frequently

Reprints and permissions: sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Corresponding Author: Annette Karmiloff-Smith, Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development, Birkbeck, University of London, 32 Torrington Square, London WC1E 7HX, England. a.karmiloff-smith@bbk.ac.uk.

Author Contributions

A. Karmiloff-Smith drafted the manuscript. A. Karmiloff-Smith, B. J. Casey, E. Massand, P. Tomalski, and M. S. C. Thomas critically revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

invoked as one-to-one mappings (Gopnik 1990; Pinker 2001) and plasticity used solely to explain a system's response to injury (Wexler, 1998). Yet human development—whether typical or atypical—involves a dynamic, self-structuring system in which plasticity is the rule, not solely an exceptional response to injury. The infant brain self-structures over developmental time (Johnson, 2001) and is not predetermined by the genome. Rather, environmental influences play a crucial role in gene expression, for example, in epigenetics (Meaney, 2010), in brain function (Johnson, 2012; Malter Cohen et al., 2013), and overall in phenotypic outcomes (Karmiloff-Smith, 1998; Karmiloff-Smith et al., 2012). In early development, brain circuits interact dynamically across different regions prior to becoming progressively specialized. If the mature adult brain is specialized (albeit also open to plasticity), we argue that this is the result of a process of gradual specialization over developmental time in which both genetic and environmental factors play a critical role as the human brain progressively structures itself (Johnson, 2001; Karmiloff-Smith, 1992, 1998). There is, indeed, a profound difference between the developed brain and the developing brain (Casey, Tottenham, Liston, & Durston, 2005; Durston et al., 2006; Karmiloff-Smith, 2010).

Four approaches address these issues in early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood using a variety of methodologies: behavioral, neuroimaging, electrophysiological, genetic, nonhuman animal models, and computational models. First, using electrophysiological measures of resting-state brain activity, we examine the impact of the environment on the infant brain, that is, how differences in socioeconomic status (SES) influence developing neural activity from a very young age (Tomalski et al., 2013). Using other methods, such as human neuroimaging and mouse models of genetic risk and protective factors, we go on to explore the impact of stress and anxiety on the developing brain (Hartley & Casey, 2013). In doing so, we examine why some adolescents with anxiety disorders respond well to exposure-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), whereas others (approximately 40–50%) do not, thereby highlighting the importance of allelic differences as well as carefully identified intervention time windows for the developing brain.

The next two approaches focus on autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in both adulthood and early childhood. Like the SES studies, the first uses electrophysiological methods, this time to differentiate between overt behavior and the underlying neural activity that supports recognition memory (Massand, Bowler, Mottron, Hosen, & Jemel, 2013). Using the same method to measure neural activity, we next examine aspects of auditory recognition memory in infants at risk of ASD. The final example also focuses on neural processes at work in early childhood, by building a neurocomputational model to test and explore the hypothesis that ASD may be caused by over-aggressive pruning early in development (Thomas, Knowland, & Karmiloff-Smith, 2011). We conclude by examining a number of outstanding questions and future directions and arguing that multiple converging methodologies are critical for understanding both the typical and the atypical case and that neurocognitive theory and methodology must always be couched in the context of a dynamic developing system.

Using Electrophysiology to Examine the Effects of SES on Early Neural Activity

Family SES differs widely in every population, which makes it difficult for low-SES families to access resources that are critical for health and well-being (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). SES is mediated by multiple factors, including, inter alia, prenatal health (e.g., exposure to toxins, stress hormones), nutrition, parental care, and cognitive stimulation. SES affects not only behavior but also both structural and functional brain development (Hackman, Farah, & Meaney, 2010). Recent data have revealed significant long-term influences of SES on both language and attention (e.g., Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Noble, McCandliss, & Farah, 2007; Stevens, Lauinger, & Neville, 2009). Correspondingly, disparities in SES are strongly associated with differences in the volume of neural structures supporting these abilities (e.g., Noble, Korgaonkar, Grieve, & Brickman, 2013; Rao et al., 2010). But does the impact of low SES build up slowly over developmental time or can its effects on brain function already be demonstrated very early in life?

With this question in mind, and because studies of toddlers (16- to 30-month-olds) have already shown that frontal gamma power of electroencephalography (EEG) predicts language development at 4 to 5 years of age (Gou, Choudhury, & Benasich, 2011), we targeted much younger infants (6- to 9-month-olds) living in East London, England, an area of high levels of socioeconomic deprivation. Using EEG, we measured spectral power of resting brain activity across the scalp in the awake state (Tomalski et al., 2013). Between-subjects comparisons of infants from low- and high-SES families revealed significantly lower frontal gamma power in those infants from low-income homes. Similar power differences were also found when we compared infants according to maternal occupation; the brains of infants from lower occupational-status groups yielded lower power over frontal electrodes. It is surprising that maternal/paternal education did not differentiate groups. This may be due to the fact that the low-SES infants came mainly from migrant families whose members have reasonable levels of education gained in their countries of origin but are obliged to carry out menial jobs in the host country (i.e., mothers working significantly below their qualifications). This result suggests that, in some circumstances, the negative effects of poverty may override the positive effects of education. SES was clearly a contributor because our analyses revealed that these group differences were not explicable in terms of differences in age, sleep quality, monolingual versus multilingual language environment, breastfeeding, family history of dyslexia, or exposure to tobacco smoke.

It is interesting that the findings were scalp-region specific to the frontal areas, whereas left and right occipital and temporal channels yielded no differences across SES groups. Noteworthy also was the fact that there were no significant SES-related individual differences in other frequency bands (theta, alpha, or beta). Thus, the differences that emerged were not only frontal-region specific but also power-band specific to gamma oscillatory activity, which is thought to index regional synchronization of brain networks (Grice et al., 2001). This finding dovetails nicely with recent neuroimaging work that has shown that low-SES status of infants is associated with a delayed trajectory of brain development, especially in frontal and parietal areas (Hanson et al., 2013). In sum, our

results indicate that the effects of differences in SES on brain activity can already be detected in the first months of life, which highlights a potential increase in the risk for subsequent atypical developmental trajectories and the need to focus interventions on this very early period of infant development.

Using Human Imaging and Mouse Genetics to Examine the Effects of Fear and Anxiety on Brain Development

Understanding intervention was one of the direct targets of the next set of studies on anxiety disorders (e.g., social phobia, separation and generalized anxiety), which are the most common form of psychiatric disorders, with a lifetime prevalence of approximately 20% to 40% (Hartley & Casey, 2013). It is interesting that diagnosis of anxiety disorders reveals a peak during the adolescent period of development. One of the most commonly used interventions to treat these disorders is exposure-based CBT that relies on basic principles of fear learning and fear extinction. And, indeed, a substantial portion of patients does improve with this intervention, yet approximately 40% to 50% do not. Why? To examine how fear-related processes differ across individuals and across developmental time, we ran a series of empirical studies that employed both human imaging and mouse genetics (Hartley & Casey, 2013). The aims of the studies were to understand changes in the brain during the transition into and out of adolescence, to use this knowledge to inform the identification and treatment of anxiety disorders, and ultimately to develop novel, evidenced-based interventions. The focus was specifically on adolescence, a period during which the brain's emotional-reactivity centers are developing prior to the brain's emotion-regulation centers, and this imbalance affects some adolescents more than others. What explains this difference?

Environmental factors, particularly early experience of institutionalization (e.g., in an orphanage), turned out to play a critical role in anxiety, even when children had been subsequently adopted into caring families offering stimulating environments. Research has shown that brain regions (particularly in the amygdala) of children adopted later in life were activated differently to threat cues, compared with children adopted sooner and who had fewer symptoms of anxiety (Tottenham et al., 2011). A mouse model that controlled for differences in environmental and genetic backgrounds, an inherent confound of naturalistic human studies, showed that early life stress played a crucial role in this restructuring of the brain (Malter Cohen et al., 2013). Although environmental factors yielded strong effects, a knock-in mouse model (Chen et al., 2006) of the human allelic variant in brain-derived neurotrophic factor (*BDNF*) Val66Met showed that both environmental factors, such as stress, and individual genetic factors contribute to differences in individuals' ability to control fear and anxiety: Altered fear extinction was shown to be a function of allelic differences in the murine *BDNF* genotype (Soliman et al., 2010). This extended to those humans whose genes express less neurotrophin and whose brains show less emotion regulation and more emotion reactivity. These allelic differences have profound implications for intervention by pointing to which individuals are likely to be the most responsive to CBT intervention that relies on basic principles of extinction learning.

Can such findings inform us about not only the efficacy of intervention for individuals but also when treatment may be most effective? Further studies have revealed that the period of

adolescence, compared with preadolescence or adulthood, is associated with less successful extinction of fear memories and diminished response for CBT exposure-based interventions (Drysdale et al., 2013; Pattwell et al., 2012), which points to a potentially key developmental time window for the design of novel, evidence-based interventions. In sum, behavioral, genetic, and brain-imaging data offer insights into who may be at greater risk for anxiety as well as into for whom and when, during development, exposure-based CBT intervention may be most effective.

Using Electrophysiology to Understand Aspects of the Autistic Profile Across Development

The next studies did not focus on intervention per se, but they are relevant to the design of intervention studies in that they demonstrate how ostensibly “normal” behavior may still require intervention because of the atypical brain processes that underlie the overt behavior. Thus, for instance, compared with healthy control participants, high-functioning individuals with ASD present with no differences in recognition memory (Bowler, Gardiner, & Gaigg, 2007) or in immediate memory or cued recall (Boucher & Bowler, 2008; Boucher & Lewis, 1989). Indeed, their behavioral scores on a variety of memory tasks are comparable with typically developing individuals (Bowler, Gardiner, & Grice, 2000). Yet, hitherto, it was unknown whether ASD memory processes relied on similar or qualitatively different neural mechanisms from the typical case. Using electrophysiological activity in the brain, we measured recognition memory in individuals with ASD compared with age- and IQ-matched neurotypical individuals. Previous event-related potential (ERP) studies on healthy participants (Cycowicz, Friedman, & Snodgrass, 2001) had shown that recognition of studied items is accompanied by enhanced positive potentials for those words that are correctly identified as “old” from an earlier study phase, compared with items correctly rejected as “new” (the so-called old/new ERP effect). The enhanced ERP positivity for old words is assumed to reflect the engagement of cognitive strategies to aid recognition memory (Cycowicz et al., 2001; Rugg & Curran, 2007).

Here, we used the same method to explore the neural activity underlying normal recognition memory in ASD (Massand et al., 2013). Replicating earlier research (Bowler et al., 2007), the behavioral data revealed no overall differences in recognition-memory scores between the ASD and comparison groups. By contrast, electrophysiological data yielded diminished old/new ERP effects in the ASD group, mainly at the central and fronto-central scalp sites. The unusual ERP effect in individuals with ASD indicates that their cognitive strategies and neural responses differ from those of typically developing individuals, despite equivalent behavioral scores. The evidence further suggests that individuals with ASD may rely on a single, nondifferentiated memory system, whereas in neurotypical individuals, two systems have emerged over developmental time. This distinct recognition-memory profile at the neural level may turn out to be an endophenotype of ASD, given that this is the first study to reveal atypical ERP recognition-memory effects in ASD, thereby demonstrating that normal behavior can result from a pattern of differing cognitive and neural processes.

The distinction between similar behaviors but different underlying neural processes does not hold only for recognition memory in ASD. Face processing in another neurodevelopmental

disorder, Williams syndrome, has yielded a similar difference between scores in the normal range at the behavioral level but atypical neural under-pinnings (Karmiloff-Smith et al., 2004). This difference once again highlights the importance of neural measures to distinguish between atypical and typical profiles and their implications for decisions about intervention.

Another example of the importance of examining the neural level comes from sensitivity to foreign-language contrasts. It had long been thought that the capacity to discriminate nonnative phonemes disappears toward the end of the 1st year of life. Indeed, although 6-month-old infants can distinguish nonnative contrasts, this ability becomes significantly diminished behaviorally at approximately 9 to 10 months of age, at which age infants no longer distinguish nonnative contrasts as they come increasingly to specialize in the phonemic repertoire of their native tongue. But neuroimaging of adults, who show no behavioral signs of distinguishing the nonnative contrasts, has revealed that adult brains are in fact still registering the foreign-language phonemic differences (Rivera-Gaxiola, Csibra, Johnson, & Karmiloff-Smith, 2000). This result once more highlights the importance of going beyond behavior and focusing on both the cognitive and the neural levels of explanation and points to the potential for successful foreign-language phonemic training even in the adult.

The study on memory processes in ASD described earlier focused on the brains of adults. But how can one understand the progressive specialization, or lack thereof, of memory processes at the other end of the developmental continuum? Can researchers derive EEG data from infants at risk of ASD (i.e., from families in which older siblings already have an ASD diagnosis) to examine the early profile of the ASD developmental memory trajectory? In fact, it has already been shown that infants at risk of ASD do not habituate and, thus, do not differentiate auditory tones (Guiraud et al., 2011). In new studies in our lab, we have targeted cross-syndrome comparisons (D'Souza et al., 2013) and used ERPs in infants with various neurodevelopmental disorders (Fragile X, Williams syndrome, and Down syndrome), compared with infants at risk of ASD (Elsabbagh & Johnson, 2010). We measured infant memory not for words, as in the adult studies, but for more simple auditory input, such as changes in speech sounds or pitch. Electrophysiological brain activity was measured while infants listened to a sequence of sounds, 70% of which were standard repeated sounds (/u/ low pitch) interspersed with 15% speech deviants (/i/ low pitch) and 15% pitch deviants (/u/ high pitch; on the basis of Lepisto et al., 2005). The infant's brain should register simple sound encoding early on (at approximately 150 ms after stimulus onset), create for recognition memory a representation of the repeated standard sounds, and show different neural activation (mismatch negativity) to changes in speech sounds or changes in pitch compared with the standard. This result was indeed the case for neurotypical infants (Elsabbagh & Johnson, 2010) but not for infants with neurodevelopmental disorders; each revealed somewhat different patterns of neural activation (D'Souza et al., 2013). In general, electrophysiological measures can uncover neural differences in both adults and infants, which are not necessarily revealed in behavioral measures and which could be important for the planning of intervention studies.

Using Neurocomputational Modeling to Explore Regression in ASD

Another interesting aspect of ASD in early development is the tendency of a subset of toddlers to regress, that is, to lose rather suddenly, during the 2nd year of life, various already established motor, social, cognitive, or language skills. Until now, these regressive events have been noted in observational research, but attempts to explain regression have been rare. Neurocomputational models turn out to be crucial tools for addressing such issues by investigating the mechanistic causes of developmental deficits; implemented models force specification of the fine details of developmental processes and often lead to novel, testable predictions.

The profile of development and regressive loss, as well as the variability in outcome of ASD in early development, has hitherto proven very hard to explain, but because of the need to specify development in great detail, it lends itself particularly well to the neurocomputational approach (Thomas et al., 2011). We thus used a neurocomputational model to test the hypothesis that regression in autism is caused by early, overly aggressive pruning of brain connections, an exaggeration of a normal phase of brain development that occurs during early childhood (Thomas et al., 2011). If such pruning differentially affects long-range connectivity, this would explain the ASD phenotype in terms of impairments, in particular to those domains relying on integrative processing (Lewis & Elman, 2008).

The model has three main virtues. First, it can explain the source of variability observed in the severity and prognosis of regression by specifying protective and risk factors for the pruning of network connectivity. For example, the model demonstrates that larger network size is a risk factor for suffering greater impairments to connectivity from aggressive pruning, which would explain why infants with ASD have been observed as a group to have larger brains (e.g., Schumann et al., 2010). Second, aggressive pruning may allow us to link the regressive subtype of autism to the broader ASD phenotype; that is, pruning may explain other developmental trajectories of autism in which regression is not observed because the underlying development is slower or because the aggressive pruning occurs earlier. Third, the hypothesis generates a number of novel predictions that are both unique and testable via emerging studies, mentioned earlier, in which researchers are following the development of infants at greater risk of autism because they are siblings of older children already diagnosed with ASD. Most notable, the overpruning hypothesis predicts that the earliest symptoms in the emergence of autism should be sensory and motor rather than social, despite a serious deficit in social skills that characterizes the phenotypic end state of older children and adults (Thomas, Davis, Karmiloff-Smith, Knowland, & Charman, 2013). That the profile of strengths and weaknesses may change across a disorder illustrates the importance of placing the developmental process itself at the heart of accounts of developmental deficits (Karmiloff-Smith, 1998).

The overpruning hypothesis of ASD, inspired by the neurocomputational model, differs from other accounts in that it does not propose a narrow primary deficit that causes secondary deficits across development (such as, e.g., attention problems causing later social deficits; Bryson et al., 2004). Instead, it proposes (like the model of adolescent anxiety discussed earlier) a time-varying, multisystem pathological process with wide impact. The

challenges for this hypothesis are to specify atypical pruning mechanisms in sufficient detail that they are testable by neuroscience data and to generate sufficiently precise predictions of the timing of the emergence of particular behavioral deficits that they are testable against psychological data and useable in the planning of intervention studies.

Future Directions

The interdisciplinary, multimethod approach to neuroscience is still in its infancy, and yet it has already yielded many exciting advances for the field with both theoretical and clinical implications. What are the challenges that scientists still need to address? What future directions surface from the studies described in this article? We address in this concluding section five general issues that must, in our view, be at the heart of future research: (a) the importance of using converging methodologies in the same study, (b) the critical nature of longitudinal research that targets individual differences, (c) consistency across multiple levels of description, (d) intervention and the need for a stronger focus on understanding not just risk factors but also protective factors in development, and (e) the general issue of emerging phenotypes.

The importance of converging methodologies

We illustrated our approach with five different methodologies: behavioral, EEG/ERP electrophysiology, structural/functional (f)MRI, nonhuman animal models, and neurocomputational models. Obviously, any single method will at best offer only a partial understanding of a neurocognitive disability. Far richer theoretical discussion and data sets stem from the convergent use of several methodologies. Future research needs, in our view, to use a combination of computational, nonhuman animal, genetic, and cellular models, as well as eye-tracking, brain-imaging, behavioral, and environmental measures, for the study of psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders in infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

It is in the area of functional brain imaging that we have witnessed huge advances in cognitive neuroscience in recent decades. However, although an attractive tool, brain imaging is no better than a pencil or a fishing trip if it is not hypothesis driven. The developing brain is unlikely to involve a series of specific brain regions simply maturing and coming “on-line.” In fact, most regions in the infant brain are partially active from very early on; what develops is best captured at the level of the complexities of changing intra- and interregional networks (Johnson, 2001). Thus, suitable methods are critical for tracing the details of developmental change in brain function for infants, children, adolescents, and adults. Moreover, a combination of methodologies is critical to capture the changes in the temporal activity of the brain (e.g., high-density EEG) as well as their location (e.g., fMRI).

A compromise that may turn out to be particularly suitable for the thin skulls of infants is functional near infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS), which is inexpensive and portable. The method can also tolerate a degree of movement, which is critical if testing awake infants sitting upright on their parent’s lap. Also, fNIRS is even more suitable for infants than for older children because the optical geometry of the infant head renders biological tissue more transparent to light in the near infrared part of the spectrum (particularly in those infants

with, as yet, no hair). Moreover, fNIRS can acquire data at a rapid temporal rate (Huppert, Diamond, & Boas, 2008), which overcomes some of the intrinsic limitations of fMRI. Finally, fNIRS surpasses EEG by providing a better spatial resolution, thereby allowing more accurate localization of brain responses to specific cortical regions (for a review, see Lloyd-Fox, Blasi, & Elwell, 2010). Although fNIRS produces better spatial resolution than EEG and better temporal resolution than fMRI, its temporal resolution is lower than EEG, and its spatial resolution is not as good as fMRI. Thus, fNIRS currently sits between the advantages and limitations of the two other methods, but this position also constitutes its major advantage and, therefore, fNIRS will, in our view, be increasingly used in future studies of the typical and atypical developing brain.

What will be required in future research is more simultaneous data acquisition using different methods in the same participants, which results in complementary, converging data about changes in the time course, spatial location, and connectivity of neural activity. This multimethod approach is starting to appear in studies of very young infants (Telkemeyer et al., 2011) as well as of children (Casey, Soliman, Bath, & Glatt, 2010; Grossman et al., 2008) and of adults (Huppert et al., 2008; Steinbrink et al., 2006). Moreover, in future, a cleverly designed developmental study of neural change over a mere few days of intervention might tell us more about change in child brain plasticity than comparing child and adult brains measured at only one time point.

The need for longitudinal research that targets individual differences

In the present research, we have covered three periods of development—infancy, adolescence, and adulthood—in a number of cross-sectional and computational studies. There clearly is also a pressing need to focus on individual differences in longitudinal approaches that, although costly and labor intensive, are critical to understanding the intricacies of development over time in the kind of detail required for neurocomputational models and intervention studies.

Our earlier discussion of the neurocomputational model of regression in ASD is a case in point. The model led to exciting, novel hypotheses, but the kind of data that would be even more useful to further advance understanding of this debilitating disorder has to involve longitudinal studies of brain connectivity change and how variations in connectivity align with emerging individual differences in behavior. Measures of a much finer level are required to understand and model the substrate of plasticity, and such details can best be garnered from the findings of longitudinal research.

A number of future questions also arise from our study of the effects of SES on infant brain development. Why is resting brain activity in early childhood such a sensitive measure of the effects of adverse environments and developmental risk or such a good predictor of developmental disabilities? And why were only frontal regions on the gamma-band range implicated? Is that a mere reflection of structural changes in the brain that occur throughout this period, for example, changes in connectivity? Or does it index processes vital for cross-domain learning? One important line of future research would therefore be to establish longitudinal relationships among structural brain development, activity of resting-state neural networks, and emerging cognitive and language skills in the first years of life.

The need for consistency across levels of description

With regard to theory, scientists must generate mechanistic accounts that link between levels of description (gene, neuron, neural networks, brains, behavior, and environment) to reconcile theories of mind at these different levels (so-called multiscale models). Bringing together levels of description may continue to reshape our theories at each level to make them more consistent (e.g., altering our theories of cognition to become more consistent with the computations that the brain is readily able to carry out). Neuroscientists need to consider development and individual differences within a common framework, as well as accept that accounts of each may diverge in their locus of influence. For example, the process of species-universal development might be highly experience dependent, whereas individual differences in trajectories of development might be largely due to genetic differences. Studies that focus on individual differences (such as twin studies and association analyses) may therefore shed little light on the importance of experience for driving species-universal development.

Intervention and the importance of identifying protective factors in development

Timing turns out to be one of the most crucial factors involved in both neurotypical and atypical developmental change. The studies discussed in this article highlight the fact that there is not a single time window in development, such as infancy, during which intervention must be done to be successful, nor can just any developmental period be targeted for intervention. All depends on the domain, the state of the developing brain, and allelic differences in the organism's reaction to environmental inputs as well as time-sensitive effects of the environment. For example, it is likely that the effects of SES on cognitive outcomes, particularly on executive function, may best be treated in early infancy before changes in prefrontal functioning become consolidated. In addition, future researchers should examine the neural effects of SES at not only the group level but also the level of individual differences that may point to specific allelic differences, thereby explaining how and why infant brains respond differentially to poor environments. We already know at the behavioral level, for instance, that adopted children from the same very adverse initial circumstances either thrive or continue to suffer in new stimulating adoptive environments (Rutter, 2008; Tottenham et al., 2010). A major question remains: Do the effects of poor SES on prefrontal areas of the infant brain differ as a function of allelic differences in infants' genome, as was shown earlier to be the case for adolescents' differing responses to intervention for stress and anxiety?

This article places a good deal of emphasis on risk and protective factors in genetics, but what about environmental influences? We are gradually gaining understanding of the negative consequences of SES disparities for various domains of cognitive development, but what about the strengths, compensation mechanisms, and coping skills of families living in poverty? What are the protective factors in the environment that mitigate against the adverse effects of SES in early development? For instance, to what extent is the quality of early infant-mother interaction (in the first few months of life) a mediator/moderator of unfavorable SES effects? The study of protective factors in early infant environment, sensitive periods in their operation and underlying mechanisms, may tell us a great deal about early brain plasticity and the best targets for designing new interventions.

But infancy is not the only period when intervention can be targeted. The research on adolescence already has made very clear that appropriate time windows must be identified by considering multiple levels, including allelic differences that make some individuals more responsive to intervention than others. Indeed, adolescence is a life stage during which the differential developmental trajectories of regions of the brain that generate fear responses and those regions that regulate them are imbalanced. The timing of this imbalance, which contributes to inefficient fear regulation that is adaptive to the behavioral demands of adolescence but can also contribute to anxiety disorders, turns out to be critical for successful intervention. These studies have clear implications for novel treatments for the developing brain because developmental and individual variation in fear responses is likely to inform the treatment of anxiety disorders. The only evidenced-based behavioral treatments for anxiety disorders currently build on basic principles of extinction learning in the identification and desensitization of the individual to the cause of his or her anxiety. For this reason, the efficacy of this treatment will be associated with the ability to extinguish fear memories (Drysdales et al., 2013). The combination of individual and developmental inefficiencies in extinction learning that predisposes to anxiety disorders in the first place means that those most in need of desensitization therapies may benefit the least.

Studies of adaptive fear learning may provide a way forward, with implications for novel evidence-based treatments that go beyond the current standard of care, by opening up a number of crucial new questions for future research: (a) Does age affect the efficacy of CBT in youth with anxiety disorders? (b) How should current behavioral-exposure therapies be modified or tailored for patients as a function of age? (c) How should current psychiatric treatments be modified or tailored for patients as a function of genetics? and (d) Given that fear memories can undergo erasure in adults, can similar techniques be used to “erase” unwanted fear memories in developing individuals, particularly during adolescence, when fear memories are resistant to classic extinction training? Recent studies (Monfils, Cowansage, Klann, & LeDoux, 2009; Schiller et al., 2010) have shown that a single, isolated presentation of a fear-associated cue opens a “reconsolidation window” during which extinction learning to that cue is enhanced. These studies were conducted with adult participants, and given the research discussed in the present article, this method obviously must be tested on adolescents. However, the results of these studies already have suggested that informed modifications of standard behavioral therapies for anxiety disorders may improve the treatment of these common and debilitating disorders. It is clear that such questions must continue to be addressed with both human studies and nonhuman animal models of adolescent anxiety.

Future intervention targets also spring from our computational modeling. In terms of a specific prediction of the overpruning account of autism, the hypothesis is that the cause is a multisystem, time-varying deficit. This hypothesis contrasts with many current accounts that posit a narrow primary deficit (e.g., to social orienting or to attention) with many secondary deficits across development. The two theories predict that different types of intervention will be effective. The multisystem hypothesis predicts that interventions must be wide, by separately addressing multiple domains of deficit, and that a narrow intervention will improve only the domain to which it is targeted (see discussion in Karmiloff-Smith et al., 2012). The primary-deficit accounts predict that if intervention occurs early enough, a

narrow intervention will suffice to alleviate many or all of the wider secondary deficits. The extent to which early interventions to improve narrow skill sets in autism generalize to wider skill sets is therefore of central importance in distinguishing between these two accounts of the cause of autism (Thomas, Davis, et al., 2013).

Emergent phenotypes

With regard to theory, it has become increasingly clear that phenotypes are emergent, not predetermined by genes or environment, and that there is a very complex interplay between allelic and environmental risk/protective factors, both of which must be understood in detail to advance the field. Neuroscience will make significant future progress if researchers focus on individual differences at multiple levels—genetic, cellular, neural, cognitive, behavioral, and environmental—rather than on only group data at a single level. This focus should also aid the planning of successful intervention. It is crucial to continue to forge the interface between our growing theoretical understanding of neurodevelopmental disorders and the practical implications for understanding behavior and treating disorders. The challenges before the field are difficult but necessary. There clearly remain more questions than answers. However, rather than attempting to simplify our approaches to neurocognitive disability, the field must embrace the complexity of a dynamic neurodevelopmental canvas that is constantly changing over time.

Acknowledgments

This article summarizes presentations and discussions at a symposium cosponsored by the Association for Psychological Science (APS) and the European Association for Developmental Psychology (EADP) and held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in September 2013. The authors wish to thank the APS and the EADP for sponsoring the symposium.

Funding

A. Karmiloff-Smith's and E. Massand's contributions to the article were funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (Grant 098330/Z/12/Z, conferred on The London Down Syndrome Consortium). The authors also acknowledge funding from the Waterloo Foundation and Autour de Williams to A. Karmiloff-Smith; Grants P50 MH62196, R01 MH63255, R21 DA15882, and R01 DA018879, National Science Foundation Grant 06-509, Department of Psychiatry, the Mortimer D. Sackler, M.D., family, the Dewitt-Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, WCMC Citigroup Biomedical Imaging Center, and the Biomedical Imaging Core to B. J. Casey and the Center for Brain, Gene and Behavioral Research Across Development; Research Studentship, City University London, to E. Massand; European Commission Marie Curie FP7-Reintegration Grants and Polish Nation Science Centre (2011/03/D/HS6/05655) to P. Tomalski; and Economic and Social Research Council Grant RES-062-23-2721 to M. S. C. Thomas.

References

- Boucher, J.; Bowler, DM. Memory in autism. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, England: 2008.
- Boucher J, Lewis V. Memory impairments and communication in relatively able autistic children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 1989; 30:99–122. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.1989.tb00771.x. [PubMed: 2925823]
- Bowler DM, Gardiner JM, Gaigg SB. Factors affecting conscious awareness in the recollective experience of adults with Asperger's syndrome. *Consciousness and Cognition*. 2007; 16:124–143. [PubMed: 16503169]
- Bowler DM, Gardiner JM, Grice SJ. Episodic memory and remembering in adults with Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 2000; 30:295–304. [PubMed: 11039856]

- Bradley RH, Corwyn RF. Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2002; 53:371–399.
- Bryson SE, Landry R, Czapinski P, McConnell B, Rombough V, Wainwright A. Autistic spectrum disorders: Causal mechanisms and recent findings on attention and emotion. *International Journal of Special Education*. 2004; 19:14–22.
- Casey BJ, Soliman F, Bath KG, Glatt CE. Imaging genetics and development: Possibilities and challenges. *Human Brain Mapping*. 2010; 31:838–851. [PubMed: 20496375]
- Casey BJ, Tottenham N, Liston C, Durston S. Imaging the developing brain: What have we learned about cognitive development? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 2005; 9:104–110. [PubMed: 15737818]
- Chen Z-Y, Jing D, Bath KG, Ieraci A, Khan T, Siao C-J, McEwen BS. Genetic variant BDNF (Val66Met) polymorphism alters anxiety-related behavior. *Science*. 2006; 314:140–143. [PubMed: 17023662]
- Clahsen, H.; Temple, CM. Words and rules in children with Williams syndrome. In: Levy, Y.; Schaeffer, J., editors. *Language competence across populations: Toward a definition of specific language impairment*. Erlbaum; Hillsdale, NJ: 2003. p. 323-352.
- Cycowicz YM, Friedman D, Snodgrass JG. Remembering the color of objects: An ERP investigation of source memory. *Cerebral Cortex*. 2001; 11:322–334. [PubMed: 11278195]
- Drysdale AT, Hartley CA, Pattwell SS, Ruberry EJ, Somerville LH, Compton SN, Walkup JT. Fear and anxiety from principle to practice: Implications for when to treat youth with anxiety disorders. *Biological Psychiatry*. 2013 Advance online publication. doi:10.1016/j.biopsych.2013.08.015.
- D'Souza, D.; Kyjonková, H.; Johnson, MH.; Gliga, T.; Kushnerenko, E.; Scerif, G.; BASIS Team. Are early neurophysiological markers of ASD syndrome-specific? Preliminary results from a cross-syndrome study; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for Autism Research, IMFAR 2013; San Sebastian, Spain. 2013, May;
- Durston S, Davidson MC, Tottenham N, Galvan A, Spicer J, Fossella JA, Casey BJ. A shift from diffuse to focal cortical activity with development. *Developmental Science*. 2006; 9:1–8. [PubMed: 16445387]
- Elsabbagh M, Johnson MH. Getting answers from babies about autism. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 2010; 14:81–87. [PubMed: 20074996]
- Fernald A, Marchman VA, Weisleder A. SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*. 2013; 16:234–248. [PubMed: 23432833]
- Gopnik M. Genetic basis of grammar defect. *Nature*. 1990; 346:226. [PubMed: 2374587]
- Gou Z, Choudhury N, Benasich AA. Resting frontal gamma power at 16, 24 and 36 months predicts individual differences in language and cognition at 4 and 5 years. *Behavioural Brain Research*. 2011; 220:263–270. [PubMed: 21295619]
- Grice SJ, Spratling MW, Karmiloff-Smith A, Halit H, Csibra G, de Haan M, Johnson MH. Disordered visual processing and oscillatory brain activity in autism and Williams syndrome. *NeuroReport*. 2001; 12:2697–2700. [PubMed: 11522950]
- Grossmann T, Johnson MJ, Lloyd-Fox S, Blasi A, Deligianni F, Elwell C, Csibra G. Early cortical specialization for face-to-face communication in human infants. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*. 2008; 275:2803–2811.
- Guiraud JA, Kushnerenko E, Tomalski P, Davies K, Ribeiro H, Johnson MH, BASIS Team. Differential habituation to repeated sounds in infants at-risk for autism. *NeuroReport*. 2011; 22:845–849. [PubMed: 21934535]
- Hackman DA, Farah MJ, Meaney MJ. Socioeconomic status and the brain: Mechanistic insights from human and animal research. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*. 2010; 11:651–659.
- Hanson JL, Hair N, Shen DG, Shi F, Gilmore JH, Wolfe BL, Pollack SD. Family poverty affects the rate of human infant brain growth. *PLoS One*. 2013; 8(12):e80954. Retrieved from <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0080954>. [PubMed: 24349025]
- Hartley CA, Casey BJ. Risk for anxiety and implications for treatment: Developmental, environmental, and genetic factors governing fear regulation. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 2013; 1304:1–13. doi:10.1111/nyas.12287. [PubMed: 24147742]

- Huppert TJ, Diamond SG, Boas DA. Direct estimation of evoked hemoglobin changes by multimodality fusion imaging. *Journal of Biomedical Optics*. 2008; 13:054031. Retrieved from <http://biomedicaloptics.spiedigitallibrary.org/article.aspx?articleid=1102801>. [PubMed: 19021411]
- Johnson MH. Functional brain development in humans. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*. 2001; 2:475–483.
- Johnson MH. Executive functions and developmental disorders: The flip side of the coin. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 2012; 16:454–457. [PubMed: 22835639]
- Karmiloff-Smith, A. *Beyond modularity: A developmental perspective on cognitive science*. MIT Press; Cambridge, MA: 1992.
- Karmiloff-Smith A. Development itself is the key to understanding developmental disorders. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 1998; 2:389–398. [PubMed: 21227254]
- Karmiloff-Smith A. Neuroimaging of the developing brain: Taking “developing” seriously. *Human Brain Mapping*. 2010; 31:934–941. [PubMed: 20496384]
- Karmiloff-Smith A, D’Souza D, Dekker TM, Van Herwegen J, Xu F, Rodic M, Ansari D. Genetic and environmental vulnerabilities in children with neurodevelopmental disorders. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*. 2012; 109(Suppl. 2):17261–17265.
- Karmiloff-Smith A, Thomas M, Annaz D, Humphreys K, Ewing S, Brace N, Campbell R. Exploring the Williams syndrome face-processing debate: The importance of building developmental trajectories. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 2004; 45:1258–1274. [PubMed: 15335346]
- Lepisto T, Kujala T, Vanhala R, Alku P, Huotilainen M, Naatanen R. The discrimination of and orienting to speech and non-speech sounds in children with autism. *Brain Research*. 2005; 1066:147–157. [PubMed: 16325159]
- Lewis JD, Elman JL. Growth-related neural reorganization and the autism phenotype: A test of the hypothesis that altered brain growth leads to altered connectivity. *Developmental Science*. 2008; 11:135–155. [PubMed: 18171375]
- Lloyd-Fox S, Blasi A, Elwell CE. Illuminating the developing brain: The past, present and future of functional near infrared spectroscopy. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*. 2010; 34:269–284. [PubMed: 19632270]
- Malter Cohen MM, Jing D, Yang RR, Tottenham N, Lee FS, Casey BJ. Early-life stress has persistent effects on amygdala function and development in mice and humans. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*. 2013; 110:18274–18278.
- Massand E, Bowler DM, Mottron L, Hosein A, Jemel B. Erp Correlates Of Recognition Memory In Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 2013; 43:2038–2047. [PubMed: 23307419]
- Meaney MJ. Epigenetics and the biological definition of Gene × Environment interactions. *Child Development*. 2010; 81:41–79. [PubMed: 20331654]
- Monfils MH, Cowansage KK, Klann E, LeDoux JE. Extinction-reconsolidation boundaries: Key to persistent attenuation of fear memories. *Science*. 2009; 324:951–955. [PubMed: 19342552]
- Noble KG, Korgaonkar MS, Grieve SM, Brickman AM. Higher education is an age-independent predictor of white matter integrity and cognitive control in late adolescence. *Developmental Science*. 2013; 16:653–664. [PubMed: 24033571]
- Noble KG, McCandliss BD, Farah MJ. Socioeconomic gradients predict individual differences in neurocognitive abilities. *Developmental Science*. 2007; 10:464–480. [PubMed: 17552936]
- Pattwell SS, Duhoux S, Hartley CA, Johnson DC, Jing D, Elliott MD, Yang RR. Altered fear learning across development in both mouse and human. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*. 2012; 109:16318–16323.
- Pinker, S. *Words and rules: The ingredients of language*. Basic Books; New York, NY: 2001.
- Rao H, Betancourt L, Giannetta JM, Brodsky NL, Korczykowski M, Avants BB, Detre JA. Early parental care is important for hippocampal maturation: Evidence from brain morphology in humans. *NeuroImage*. 2010; 49:1144–1150. [PubMed: 19595774]
- Rivera-Gaxiola M, Csibra G, Johnson MH, Karmiloff-Smith A. Electrophysiological correlates of cross-linguistic speech perception in native English speakers. *Behavioural Brain Research*. 2000; 111:13–23. [PubMed: 10840128]

- Rugg MD, Curran T. Event-related potentials and recognition memory. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 2007; 11:251–257. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2007.04.004. [PubMed: 17481940]
- Rutter, M., editor. Genetic effects on environmental vulnerability: Novartis Foundation Symposium. Vol. 293. John Wiley & Sons; Chichester, England: 2008.
- Schiller D, Monfils MH, Candace MR, Johnson DC, LeDoux JE, Phelps EA. Preventing the return of fear in humans using reconsolidation update mechanisms. *Nature*. 2010; 463:49–53. [PubMed: 20010606]
- Schumann CM, Bloss CS, Barnes CC, Wideman GM, Carper RA, Akshoomoff N, Lord C. Longitudinal magnetic resonance imaging study of cortical development through early childhood in autism. *Journal of Neuroscience*. 2010; 30:4419–4427. [PubMed: 20335478]
- Soliman F, Glatt CE, Bath KG, Levita L, Jones RM, Pattwell SS, Somerville LH. A genetic variant BDNF polymorphism alters extinction learning in both mouse and human. *Science*. 2010; 327:863–866. [PubMed: 20075215]
- Stevens C, Lauinger B, Neville H. Differences in the neural mechanisms of selective attention in children from different socioeconomic backgrounds: An event-related brain potential study. *Developmental Science*. 2009; 12:634–646. [PubMed: 19635089]
- Steinbrink J, Villringer A, Kempf F, Haux D, Boden S, Obrig H. Illuminating the BOLD signal: Combined fMRI-fNIRS studies. *Magnetic Resonance Imaging*. 2006; 24:495–505. [PubMed: 16677956]
- Telkemeyer S, Rossi S, Nierhaus T, Steinbrink J, Obrig H, Wartenburger I. Acoustic processing of temporally modulated sounds in infants: Evidence from a combined near-infrared spectroscopy and EEG study. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2011; 1:62. Retrieved from <http://www.frontiersin.org/Journal/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00062/full>. [PubMed: 21716574]
- Thomas MSC, Davis R, Karmiloff-Smith A, Knowland VCP, Charman T. The over-pruning hypothesis of autism. 2013 Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Thomas MSC, Knowland VCP, Karmiloff-Smith A. Mechanisms of developmental regression in autism and the broader phenotype: A neural network modeling approach. *Psychological Review*. 2011; 118:637–654. [PubMed: 21875243]
- Tomalski P, Moore DG, Ribeiro H, Axelsson EL, Murphy E, Karmiloff-Smith A, Kushnerenko E. Socioeconomic status and functional brain development—Associations in early infancy. *Developmental Science*. 2013; 16:676–687. [PubMed: 24033573]
- Tottenham N, Hare TA, Quinn BT, McCarry TW, Nurse M, Gilhooly T, Eigsti I. Prolonged institutional rearing is associated with atypically large amygdala volume and difficulties in emotion regulation. *Developmental Science*. 2010; 13:46–61. [PubMed: 20121862]
- Wexler, K. Methodology in the study of language acquisition: A modular approach. In: Ritchie, WC.; Bhatia, TK., editors. *Handbook of language acquisition*. Academic Press; San Diego, CA: 1998. p. 387-425.